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When a Boy Becomes a Man

A Little Book for Boys

By HOWARD BISSEKER, M. A.

Revised by
The Council of the Medical Officers of Schools Association of London, England

With a Foreword
By EDWARD BOK
Editor of The Ladies' Home Journal

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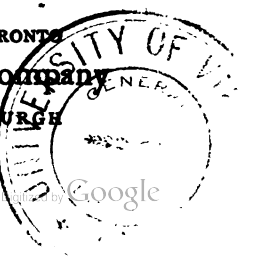

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A Foreword

EACH year there is a stronger conviction among the men and women who have the truest interests of boys at heart, and who work among them, that after a certain age, generally at the age of fourteen, every boy should have the important physical facts about himself placed before him as carefully as possible and yet in a perfectly frank way. The boy has a right to this knowledge: he is entitled to know what he faces as he reaches the age when youth is beginning to merge into manhood.

It is this knowledge, carefully and delicately put, that this little book sets out to give,—I think successfully. It was written from the author's love for boys, and based on his knowledge of them as an English public school master for a number of

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years. There was no idea that the little book would ever go beyond the private circulation for which it was intended. But so warmly was it welcomed that the Council of Medical Officers of Schools Association of London volunteered to revise the contents so that there might be no doubt of the accuracy of the statements made from a medical and scientific standpoint. It was thereupon reissued, since which time endorsements have come to the author from eminent medical sources, and in one of the foremost and largest private schools in America it is used regularly by the head master with his boys.

The little book is at once an explanation, a warning, and a practical help, and as such every parent may well be glad that it was written.

EDWARD BOK.

Philadelphia,
January, 1912.

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An Explanation

To the Boy Who May Receive This Book

YOU may have received this little book from your father, or guardian, or schoolmaster or from a friend, and you may be somewhat surprised at the earnest request that has been made to you to give it your careful reading. The reason of the gift and of the request is quite a simple one. While your friends have abundant chances of speaking to you on almost every subject that concerns your many-sided life, there are yet one or two matters about which you ought to be told, but which are too delicate to be mentioned without very careful thought. And since you too, as well as your friends, might find it difficult to deal with these questions in conversation, this book has been given you that

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you may have the chance of studying them quietly and privately for yourself.

For, now that you have reached your present age, it is of great importance that you should know the facts that I shall put before you. It is because they have known nothing of these facts that many hundreds of boys have brought serious trouble into their lives even before their school days were over; and this book is written in order that, by having once for all a perfectly frank and open explanation of the subject, you at any rate may be saved from the risk of similar ignorance.

YOU must not be repelled when I say that part of my object is to warn you of a certain sin against the body. As a rule, it is true, to warn a boy personally against any particular sin implies some degree of suspicion as to his moral character. But when you have read what I have to say about the special sin in ques-

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tion, you will see that the warning I give does not necessarily involve any such suspicion. For this is a sin to which many boys are liable who are at the first incapable of stooping to the better known sins of modern school life.

IT sometimes happens that the original cause of the sin is in many cases *physical.* A boy who is perfectly pure-minded may suffer from occasional or frequent irritation in the part of his body concerned, and a not unnatural attempt to relieve this irritation may lead him unconsciously into the dangerous practice of which I am going to write. There is a sense, also, in which the practice is a source of special peril to the more intelligent boys, because, being generally more "highly-strung" and of a more nervous constitution, they are for this very reason especially susceptible to it. From purely

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physical reasons, therefore, and quite apart from any moral considerations, a boy may have a tendency to this dangerous habit: so that to warn him against it need not in any degree involve suspicion of his personal character.

THERE is a second reason why it is felt that this subject should not be kept secret from any boy of your age. It is simply ignorance of what the habit in question means that is responsible for many a boy's having become a slave to it. Boys often fall into this serious evil *without knowing that it is a serious evil.* This is the complaint of hundreds of men to-day. They see clearly now how injurious the habit is, and yet, when as boys they first yielded to it, they did not realize that they were doing any definite harm. Why, they ask, was there no one to open their eyes to what it all meant? I have had to deal with more than one boy who

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has well-nigh ruined himself, both in his body and in his moral nature, *merely because there was no friend to warn him of this evil practice.* Since the consequences of this habit may be so serious, every boy, as it appears to me, has a right to be told about them, lest ignorance should involve him in them. "Every boy," I say: for experience shows that information may be desirable in the most unexpected quarters. Some of the finest men I know have told me that, as boys, they were led through ignorance into this sin, and that, even after their eyes were opened to its meaning, it was only after a terrible battle that they conquered it.

THE fact, then, that some friend has given you this book does *not* necessarily mean that he in any way suspects your moral character: for until some one has done for you what we are

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trying to do now, you may be blind to the existence of this special danger.

In a matter so important as is this, information ought to be given before, and not after, the catastrophe, and I fully expect that a large proportion of my readers will be, not boys who have already fallen victims to this sin, but boys who have a right to know what the facts of the case are, so that they may both keep themselves safe and help to keep others safe also.

I HAVE a second purpose in this book. There are scores of boys, who, while perfectly innocent of this sin, yet suffer from something that looks very much like it. Because this particular experience has never been explained to them, they nat urally confuse it with the sin which resembles it so closely, and torture themselves by expecting to receive the dreadful consequences attached to self-abuse. For

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a pure-minded boy, who is quite unconscious of any willful yielding to such a sin, to imagine himself guilty of impurity means that he must pass through moments of acute suffering. In some instances the sense of shame he feels occasions the most exquisite mental torture. Now there are many of us who maintain that it is sheer cruelty needlessly to allow innocent-minded boys to suffer this when there is absolutely no cause for such self-reproach. And since we know that there are everywhere boys who are thus torturing themselves without reason, we are anxious to relieve them of their unnecessary burden. Though the warning that is bound up with this little book is totally unnecessary to him, the purest boy alive may need this word of encouragement.

H. BISSEKER.

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I

WHAT GOES ON INSIDE OF YOU

IN order to make matters perfectly plain, I must tell you something about what is going on inside your own body. You know, of course, that in the private part of every boy's form there is a kind of small bag or purse which contains two little round bodies. Now the blood which flows through his frame is stored with thousands and thousands of tiny particles, the chief of which deposit in these two little round bodies some of their most valuable contents. The substance thus deposited is known as the *semen* or "seed."

It is quite easy for a boy, if he wishes to do so, to draw some of this important fluid out of his body. This is done by indecently forcing the private part of the body until there ensues the loss of a

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certain whitish fluid. This substance is the *semen* of which we have been speaking. Boys learn to practice this abuse of the body in many ways. Sometimes the sensation which leads to it is discovered by sliding down banisters; at other times by climbing poles or trees. There are cases in which a boy learns the habit by trying to relieve itching in this part of his body; there are other cases, and these are the majority, in which one boy is told of it by another. In whatever way it is learnt, its results, if it is persisted in, are equally dangerous. But there is a natural method by which some of this semen is lost which has given hundreds of pure-minded boys hours of unnecessary suffering.

After a certain age (which varies from about twelve upwards) a boy begins to discover from time to time that he loses some of this *semen* without any conscious attempt on his own part to bring this about. This experience, he notices, generally takes place

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in bed. Sometimes he knows nothing about the loss of *semen* until the morning, when he sees traces of it on his pajamas or night-shirt. At other times the loss is attended by nasty dreams, in the course of which he wakes up to find the *semen* flowing from him. In either case he is naturally puzzled. As a rule, no one has given him the slightest indication that such a thing may happen, and consequently he falls into the error of confusing this experience with the sin of abusing the body of which he may have heard. Both involve a loss of this important fluid; surely, he tells himself, both must bring the same consequences. The dismay with which he views such a possibility grows greater rather than less as, despite the lapse of time, these discharges of *semen* still continue, and since he usually regards them as things to be ashamed of, he hides them away as a secret that must not be named even to his nearest friend. Thus it is that week after week he

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carries a private trouble in his own heart. He has a sense of shame because, though he means to be pure, he seems—in spite of himself—to be impure. Indeed, the whole mysterious experience is a dreadful "skeleton" to him, and often preys seriously on his mind.

Now if you know anything of this experience, I am glad to be able to relieve your mind of anxiety. *These unintentional losses of semen are quite a different thing from the habit of the abuse of the body, and the consequences of the two are also different.* The explanation of the losses at night is very simple. As you grow from boyhood into manhood the *semen*, whose formation I described above, is produced more rapidly, until at times the body holds more of it than it really requires. Then Nature quietly relieves herself by means of these discharges. But this is a very different thing from what takes place in the habit of the abuse of the body.

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Unless, therefore, these natural discharges take place very frequently, you need not trouble about them. The frequency with which they may safely occur varies according to a boy's temperament, and it is impossible to make any very definite statement on the point. But, generally speaking, I should say this: If they don't occur more often than once in ten days or a fortnight, don't worry at all about them. If they *are* more frequent than that, just tell your family- or school-doctor, and ask his advice. This consultation with a doctor is especially desirable when the discharges leave a boy with a feeling of weakness. And remember, as you take either a medical man or any one else into your confidence, that you have nothing whatever to be ashamed of in the matter. So far as can be judged, almost every man, the purest and best not excepted, passes through just the same experience as you.

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II

HOW A BOY CAN INJURE HIS FUTURE

NOW while the natural and unintentional losses of semen are so harmless in their results, the very opposite is true of a deliberate loss of this vital fluid.

The *semen* is important for the development of the whole body, and so, if it is drained away by the habit in question, the whole body is liable to suffer.

Not only can the habit hinder actual development: it may also produce positive effects upon the body so far as it has already been developed. The muscles of a boy who habitually practices an abuse of the body tend to become increasingly weak and flabby. This tendency is accompanied by a weariness and languor of the body generally. The forcefulness and

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energy which mean so much to it begin to disappear. The result is that the boy is physically unequal to efforts which before he has achieved with ease. To illustrate this by a specific example, a runner's pace is noticeably lessened by the habitual practice of this abuse of the body. The same thing is true of any athlete's staying powers. That is why before any big athletic contest a keen trainer of a team will (as I think you will find) use every means at his disposal to prevent his men from any indulgences of this sort. The effect of the habit in question upon the muscles and the staying force is such that it has ruined many a man's chance of high athletic distinction.

The effect upon the nervous system is no less serious. The nerves form one of the most delicate parts of the organism with which no one can trifle with impunity. Now every time a boy practices this habit he gives a shock, more or less serious,

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to the nerves that run all through his body, and he has only to repeat these smaller shocks often enough to produce really grave results affecting his entire nervous system.

As a matter of actual fact, no boy can yield to the habit of this abuse of his body without running great physical risks. Not merely will it weaken his general condition and so hinder his athletic ambitions, but also, if carried on long enough, it will seriously affect his entire health.

Another fearful result of this habit is the effect on a boy's mind as well as his body. There are several ways in which its effects show themselves.

One common result is the development of an excessive sensitiveness of mind, which reveals itself sometimes in the form of shyness and at other times in the form of an unhealthy morbidness. The boy whose mind is affected in this manner gets into the way of shunning company. He prefers

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to be alone to an altogether unwholesome extent. Such a disposition narrows down his scope of life, and has an adverse influence upon his mental health.

A more serious consequence is the weakening of the general mental force. A slave to the habit, for example, begins to discover after a time that his mind has not the same *grip* of things as it used to have. It is less alert. It cannot tackle hard problems with the old ease. It has taken on itself a taint of indolence, and prefers to pass over difficulties instead of grappling with them. The memory, moreover, grows uncertain and less and less tenacious. In a word, the whole staying powers of the mind are as grievously reduced as were those of the body, and on every effort it undertakes, the brain brings to bear far less strength of application and of quiet self-control than it would otherwise have commanded. All this is serious to an extent which, in view of a boy's

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struggle in his business or professional life, it would be difficult to exaggerate. It means that he is losing just those faculties of mind on which all his future success depends.

There is a third effect of a still more serious nature. A continued yielding to the practice has been known to bring about distinct and grave mental unbalance.

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III

THE GREATEST DANGER OF ALL

THE habit of a boy's abuse of his body has not done its work when it has produced its serious physical and mental consequences. It has a third series of effects which are of even greater moment than these. They are the effects upon the moral nature.

It may seem a strong thing to say, but it is nevertheless true, that indulgence in this particular habit is able to change the whole moral condition of a boy. It is not long, for example, before he begins under its influence to lose that frankness which is one of life's greatest charms. For the victim of this sin tends to grow secretive in disposition. Instead of looking you squarely in the face, as of old, he becomes shifty and suspicious, and no longer gives the impression of being open

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and candid in his dealings. That means, of course, that he loses the respect and confidence of those with whom he associates, and is himself regarded with distrust and suspicion.

There is further danger that the habit will familiarize his mind with a whole realm of impure thoughts. The mind that before was clean and pure, often through this means begins to take delight in what is dirty and debasing. Indeed, to practice this habit is to open the flood-gates of the mind to a strong stream of impurity, which flows in and corrupts the whole imagination. And because a man's thoughts always mould his words and actions, what corrupts the imagination soon corrupts the entire life.

Side by side with this corruption of the mind there is a weakening of the boy's moral sense. Of all the effects of this habit that is, perhaps, the most serious because our moral sense—that which distinguishes

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for us between right and wrong—is the most important of all our natural endowments. The tendency of this habit is to destroy this altogether. You will find that any boy who is really given up to the habit grows in time either careless of or blind to moral distinctions. Whereas before he may have had a high sense of honour and truth, now he becomes shifty and uncertain. Unwilling or unable to realize the difference between right from wrong, he will lie to you in the most open manner, and even persuade himself that falsity to truth is nothing to be ashamed of. In the same way he may try to believe that the impurity which he has allowed to enter his thoughts is a matter for which he has not the slightest occasion to blush. In a word, *he is losing his moral eyesight.* There is no state into which a boy may bring himself that is more hopeless or more awful than this. If he is to go through life confusing truth and falsehood,

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and blind to the difference between right and wrong, his future is bound to be one of more or less open dishonour. And this destruction of the moral sense, with this certainty of a degraded future, is often directly traceable to the dangerous habit of which I am writing.

Lastly, as there is a weakening of the moral sense, so there is also a weakening of the will-power. The plea that a boy often makes is that he does not intend to become a slave to this habit of abusing his body. All that he intends to do is to indulge in it for a time, and then give it up once for all. That is one of the easiest things in the world to *say*, but it is one of the hardest things in the world to *do*. What a boy who speaks in this way overlooks is the fact that the practice, once admitted into the life, *increases its hold to an absolutely startling degree*. Every act of indulgence adds, as it were, one more cord to the bonds which the habit is wrap-

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ping round him. To put it in another way, just as the draining away of the *semen* destroys the body and the brain, so also it gradually destroys the will. Each time the habit is practiced the will is left so much weaker for future resistance. And so it happens that, should the habit be indulged beyond a certain point, a boy loses his power of resisting it and it holds him a *slave in spite of himself.* Here, let me say, I am not drawing on my imagination. I have talked with men who have been slaves to this practice, and I have found that there are cases in which, even when at last they realized the awful retribution that threatens them, and are willing to give everything they have to be freed from the habit, they yet feel that they have no strength to pull themselves up. They are slaves. *Their will-power has just wasted away.* This is a fact that every boy must face who yields to this sin. Though it may be comparatively easy to

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abandon the habit at first, the longer he continues in it the less chance he has of finally mastering it, until, if he persists beyond a certain point, it is a matter for serious question whether he will ever be able to free himself from its grip. No amount of better desires and better resolutions later on in life can save a boy unless he has the will-power to carry them out. And it is just this will-power that the wasting of the *semen* saps little by little away.

Let me sum up in a separate paragraph the effects of any or all of which may follow habitual indulgence in this seemingly harmless but yet fearfully dangerous practice. The effects on the body may be a weakening physical frame, which interferes with the possession of perfect health; a weakening of the muscular system, which will hinder the possibility of the highest athletic achievement; and a weakening of the nervous system, which diminish the

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whole enjoyment of life. The effects on the life may be a morbid spirit of exclusiveness, which will prevent breadth of life and the highest mental health; a weakening of brain-force, which will destroy alertness, memory, and other qualities essential to a successful career; and, in extreme cases, a tendency to actual disease. The effects on the moral nature may be a shiftiness of disposition, which will imperil both the boy's own candour and other people's confidence in him; a corruption of the imagination which will foster impurity both of mind and of life; a slackening of the moral sense, which will lessen the whole perception of right and wrong, and with it, the hope of a truly honourable future; and, lastly, a sapping away of the will-power, which in extreme cases may take away the chance of self-recovery, even though the desire for it should come. These consequences, of course, do not come immediately or, of necessity, all to

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gether. But if the habit is persisted in, a greater or smaller number of them follow one another in due course, until the whole of life—life in its physical aspect, life in its intellectual aspect, life in its spiritual aspect—may be ruined.

It is the serious nature of these consequences, you will now see, that has made me write to boys in this way. I know that a boy often yields to the habit without in the least understanding what he is doing, and it appears to me altogether wrong that he should have the chance of ruining his whole life in sheer blindness and ignorance. There would be less need for information if the habit were one which he could easily break as soon as he discovered how serious it was: but, as we have seen, this is far from being the case, since the discovery often comes only when the habit has already obtained a strong hold upon him. Seeing, therefore, that the consequences of the practice are

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so grave, I am convinced that every boy has a right to be told what he is risking if he does give way to it.

And now that your eyes have once been opened to what is involved in this dangerous habit, you will scarcely need, even if you ever might have needed, any warning against it. Should you be tempted by any other boy to indulge in it, turn from him as from one who is offering you the deadliest of all deadly poisons: for to yield to his suggestion is to poison yourself in every part of your nature. Should you know any other fellow to be guilty of the practice, make a frank and manly attempt to save him: for to do this might very well be to save his life in every sense of the word.

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IV

WHERE NATURE TAKES ITS COURSE

NOW I want to give a few practical hints, first of all to boys who are finding that night discharges take place rather frequently; and, secondly, to any boys who, having yielded to the habit of an abuse of his body in ignorance of what it meant, are anxious to know what will help them to break away from the habit.

There are a good many simple plans by which the frequency of night discharges may be reduced. One important help consists in keeping the body in as healthy a state as possible. Special points to attend to for this particular purpose are:

1.—Spend at least two hours every day in the open air, taking care to get regular physical exercise of a vigorous kind. One boy has told me that he also derived much

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help in this respect from the regular use of a Sandow-exercise before turning into bed.

2.—Go in for cold baths frequently—never, when you can bear them, less often than once a week, and preferably once a day.

3.—Do not take a heavy meal late at night, and avoid all intoxicating drinks. Instead, drink two goblets full of cold water upon rising and two more upon retiring. Make these four goblets of cold water a rule of your life.

4.—Be careful that your bowels act regularly and thoroughly at least once a day.

5.—Should you have much irritation in the sexual member, consult your family doctor. There is not the slightest danger in such a trouble as this, but your doctor is the best man to advise you on the point.

6.—See that your room is well ventilated. You should always sleep with your window open, winter and summer.

7.—If the discharges come to you too

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frequently, bathe the organs with cold water on rising in the morning.

8.—If possible, always have a bed to yourself. It is important, also, to sleep on a hard mattress and to make your bed-clothes as light as you possibly can. Have no counterpane or quilt on the bed.

9.—Be careful, as far as you are able, to sleep on your side. Lying on the back or on the stomach encourages these discharges. It isn't difficult with a little practice to get into the habit of sleeping on your side. Should you find this hard at first, a good plan is to tie a reel on some wool or tape, and fasten this round your waist in such a manner that the reel is always on your back. Then, if you do unconsciously get on your back, the reel may wake you up.

10.—Another excellent rule is not to let yourself fall into a second sleep after you have been called in the morning. Probably more than half these discharges take

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place after 6 and 7 A. M., and it is very frequently in the second or third "doze" that they occur. If, then, you find, as is not unlikely, that they generally trouble you at about that time, it is a good plan to wake yourself a quarter of an hour beforehand by means of an alarm clock, and also to rise and pass water as soon as you waken.

11.—Avoid at all times the habit of handling the organs.

12.—Try your utmost to keep away thoughts that are not perfectly modest. Impure ideas are generally ready to present themselves to most boys' minds. In whatever way they are suggested—whether by indecent pictures, "smutty" talk, or by the boy's own imagination—the mental influence which they produce, quite apart from their moral dangers, has a direct effect upon the physical formation of the *semen;* and so freedom from all questionable thoughts is likely to diminish the number of nightly discharges.

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V

TO THE BOY WHO HAS YIELDED

NOW to any boy who has thoughtlessly yielded to the habit of abusing his body, and wishes to free himself from its dangerous influence, I will give this advice:

First: He should carry out with special care the suggestions made in the previous chapter. For, whereas the night discharges need not trouble him so long as they have been unprovoked, they are by no means equally harmless when they have been deliberately provoked. A boy who has yielded to this vice, therefore, should do everything he can to lessen their occurrence.

Second: If a boy means to conquer the habit by far the most important step is that of *making up his mind in real earnest*

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that he will do so. If his mind is only half made up, he is almost certain to fall back. The hold that the habit gets over its victims becomes so terribly strong that half-and-half measures are useless. A boy must pull himself up and look his situation in the face. Is he, or is he not, prepared to accept the consequences which continuance in the practice will make inevitable? And if not, he must make one strong, invincible determination to have nothing whatever to do with it in the future. *I can hold out no hope for a boy until such a decision has been reached.* Even after the decision he may have a very hard battle to fight. Its length and fierceness will depend, of course, upon how long he has been accustomed to indulge in the habit. In any case, however, he must be prepared for a big struggle with himself. For weeks and for months, he may be hard pressed by the temptation: but at whatever cost to himself *he must*

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not yield an inch. His only hope lies in the unwavering strength of his resistance.

Third: His chance of victory, meanwhile, will be greatly increased if he will try to keep his mind engaged as much as possible. If unoccupied, it will naturally turn to thoughts of the vice, and with the thoughts will come the temptation. He should be careful, therefore, while the fight is particularly hard, to be always doing something—working, playing games, reading, talking. It is under such circumstances that he may find the constant companionship of a friend or an engrossing interest in some hobby to be of special service. What he must not do is to leave himself to himself more than he can help. For lack of employment for the mind is an invitation to the vice to reassert its influence.

Fourth: He should also prepare *beforehand* some safeguards against times in which, despite such watchfulness, the temptation is especially strong. I will

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suggest several safeguards of this kind: (1) To repair *instantly* to other people's company; (2) to sit down and write for half an hour without stopping; (3) to take up some exercise that engages the hands for a similar time and with the same concentration of mind; or, best of all, (4) to find a quiet spot and seek unseen help, continuing the prayer until for the present the temptation has passed away. By such means it is possible for a boy to *give himself no time for yielding* to the vice: for the very instant the temptation comes he resorts to one of these safeguards, and is secure.

Fifth: His fight will be the easier if, further, he tries to help some other boy who is in need of help. One obvious way of doing this is to warn any one who seems to require a warning. To take such a step is to compromise himself on the side of purity, and the remembrance that he has done this may help him to resist his own temptation.

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Sixth: Throughout his struggle for self-recovery *let him have nothing whatever to do with quack doctors and their newspaper advertisements.* To get into their hands is dangerous.

Seventh: There are, on the contrary, few things that will help him so much as taking one friend into his confidence. If he himself is the only person who knows of the fight he is waging, there is always a danger that this very secrecy will undo him. The thought that no one would be any wiser if he did yield, might very well weaken his decision in a moment of special temptation. The remembrance, on the contrary, that some one friend knew of his resolution, would bring a sense of sympathy and strength that would make him ashamed of falling back into vice. It is a curious fact, but it *is* a fact, that many a danger is lessened for us as soon as somebody else knows that we are threatened by it. And

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so if there is any fellow who means to put all he knows into this fight, what I say to him is this: Find a confidant on whom you can rely. The best one of all is your own father. Tell him frankly about your trouble and about your resolve to rise above it. Promise to go and inform him immediately if at any time you should be betrayed into yielding again. This will act as a strong check upon you, and the mere knowledge that he knows will strengthen you for your struggle. Don't stop to consider the shame you will feel in talking to him. The shame is unpleasant, but it is nothing to the danger you have to escape and therefore must not hinder you. If you feel that you can't speak, write your father a simple note and tell him in that way.

A father, I say, is as a rule a boy's best confidant. But should you for any reason prefer to have one less closely linked to you, find some one else whom you can

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trust—perhaps your house-master or a wise elder brother.

But whoever your confidant be, if you have formed this habit and want to break it, choose some one, and share your secret with him. He might help you more than you, perhaps, imagine.

That, then, is the advice I would give to any boy who has fallen into this habit. Let him thus use every means he can to save himself from it, and he may certainly succeed in his purpose. Though, as we have seen, it may be carried so far that the difficulty of recovery may be very great, intense earnestness of purpose can bring success. The danger is far too real to allow of any trifling. A boy's only hope of restoration lies in his patiently and continuously exerting all the will-power at his command, until, after a longer or shorter fight, the victory has been gained over what is, in lessons of life, a boy's first fight.

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